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# The betweenness of the double stranger: British converts to Islam and patterns of belonging

Social Compass

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## Abstract

British converts to Islam can be hard to locate in relation to the majority and born Muslim minority in society and can experience rejection from both sides. Based on an ethnic lens and framework, they are conceptualised as ‘in-between’ the two, neither fully one nor the other. This article argues that by foregrounding religious rather than ethnic identity, a different pattern of how converts position themselves in society emerges. To do so, it draws on a study of converts’ narratives and investigates the dynamics of how a divide between religion and culture emerges from these narratives. To discuss these dynamics, it draws on Simmel’s influential essay *The Stranger* in order to develop an analytical reorientation that centralises the religious aspect in order to gain a new relational understanding of converts’ belonging as well as the social aspects of the conversion process itself.

## Keywords

belonging, converts to Islam, religious identity, stranger

## Résumé

Les Britanniques convertis à l’islam peuvent être difficiles à situer dans la société aussi bien par rapport à la majorité qu’à la minorité née musulmane, et ils peuvent subir un rejet de part et d’autre. Sur base d’un cadre et d’une perspective ethnique, ils sont conceptualisés comme étant « entre les deux », ni totalement l’un ni totalement l’autre. Cet article suggère qu’en mettant en avant l’identité religieuse plutôt que l’identité

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ethnique, un modèle différent émerge sur la façon dont les convertis se positionnent dans la société. Pour ce faire, il s'appuie sur une étude de récits de convertis et analyse les dynamiques de l'émergence d'un clivage entre religion et culture dans ces récits. L'article s'appuie sur l'essai influent de Simmel *L'étranger* pour discuter de ces dynamiques dans le but de développer une réorientation analytique qui centralise l'aspect religieux afin de parvenir à une nouvelle compréhension relationnelle de l'appartenance des convertis ainsi que des aspects sociaux du processus de conversion lui-même.

### Mots-clés

appartenance, convertis à l'islam, étranger, identité religieuse

## Introduction

Recent debates around Muslims and Islam in Western European polities have struggled over the idea of belonging. Academic, political, and policy debates in Britain, the case that forms the focus for this article, for example, have oriented around ideas such as 'segregated' communities, a clash or contest between national and religious categories, and whether Islamophobia is a form of racism. Surveys and opinion polls of public attitudes have routinely found that around half think Islam is not compatible with 'British values' (Ipsos Mori, 2018). Thus, both Muslims as people and Islam as a religion are 'othered', and struggle to be seen as belonging.

Yet, Muslims themselves report a strong sense of belonging to Britain (Ipsos Mori, 2018) and that there is no necessary clash between their religious and British identity (Karlsen and Nazroo, 2015), something also found in other Western European countries (Duderija, 2007). Studies focussed on young Muslims in Britain return similar findings while highlighting a discursive religion–culture divide (DeHanas, 2016; Jacobson, 1997); for many their religious identity is stressed against both a secular society in which religion, and Islam in particular, has become increasingly seen as a problem, as well as against family and peers whose interpretation of Islam is seen to be 'cultural' and not able to speak to their lives as young people in Britain.

A key issue then is a need to trace forms of (un)belonging along the lines of both religious and cultural markers and dynamics. This article does this by drawing on the case of converts to Islam in Britain, which although analytically neglected in the literature, presents a stark example of the dynamics of a religion–culture division. Converts' identities as Muslim and British are also challenged, a pattern apparent in other Western European countries (Jensen, 2008; Midden, 2018), and converts also draw a distinction between religion and culture and grapple with how (un)belonging is imposed from the 'outside' along with their own senses of belonging that stem from the 'inside'. This article explores the religion–culture divide found in converts' narratives to address the question of how converts are seen and see themselves as belonging or not.

## Converts to Islam in social space

Franks (2000) suggested the idea of a British Muslim convert is hard to locate in relation to majority and minorities in society and Gallonier (2015) has highlighted how this is

complicated by different historical legacies of colonialism and ‘race’. Attempts to locate the position of European converts have conceptualised them as ‘bridges’ or in ‘liminal’ space between born Muslim communities and a non-Muslim majority (Jawad, 2012; Moosavi, 2013; Roald, 2004; Soutar, 2010; Suleiman, 2013; van Nieuwkerk, 2004; Zebiri, 2008). These concepts, however, leave converts ‘in-between’ these two sides. Whether seen as transiting between, as in the liminal, or a means to connect them, as in the bridge, the distinction is maintained and converts are somewhat stuck in the middle of the two separate poles of born Muslims and non-Muslims in Britain, a position where ‘people tend to trample on you’ as quoted by Suleiman (2013: 84).

Alternatively, converts’ religious practice has been seen as a tactical mode of belonging, where converts adapt and ‘perform’ in conformance to the benchmark of the ‘authentic’ norms and practices of a particular community, thereby gaining belonging to it (Hervieu-Léger, 1999; Moosavi, 2012). Relatedly, Köse (1996: 140) suggested converts might become stuck in limbo where ‘resocialization may never be completed’. This is not to suggest that these in-between positions cannot be adopted as a form of agency (Midden, 2018), but to point to the ethnic gaze in these conceptualisations, which leaves British converts to Islam stuck in-between two sides.

This article argues that whereas existing conceptualisations are based on an ‘ethnic lens’, which may reflect what positions they are put into by others, it can obscure how converts position themselves. It further argues that central to such positions is the foregrounding of *religious* identity that emerges from converts’ narratives, which requires a fresh analytical orientation. This analytical shift has two main benefits. First, it better accords with converts’ self-understanding. Second, it allows a view of converts as belonging, as *of* society rather than in-between parts of society.

The article draws on a study of the narratives of converts to Islam to begin to unpick the religion–culture divide. This divide is a feature common across the narratives and it is this common dynamic that this article investigates to address the question of how converts in Britain locate themselves in relation to both ‘majority society’ and born Muslim minorities. To do so, it draws on Simmel’s notion of the *stranger* as a way of analysing patterns of *betweenness*; Simmel seeing society ‘as constituted by interactional “forces” *between* individuals’ (Frisby, 1992: 11, emphasis in original). That is, rather than seeing converts as in-between two opposing sides, it traces more nuanced and cross-cutting patterns of connectivity between converts, ‘majority society’, and born Muslims.

## Fieldwork

This article draws on a study of 27 narratives of converts to Islam in Britain collected in 2017 in towns with few if any other converts as well as cities, such as Brighton, Cardiff, Bristol, Bradford, and London. Participants were found through convert networks connected to mosques, organisations and through personal contacts. Broadly reflecting the demographic background sketched in previous studies (Brice, 2010; Zebiri, 2008), just over half the participants were White British/European, a quarter British Asian, three Black British and two mixed race; 19 were female and 8 male; just under half had previously been practising Catholic, Protestant, or Hindu, while the rest had mostly been nominally Protestant, Catholic, Hindu, or Sikh, with two describing themselves formerly

as spiritual and three as atheist. They were aged between 18 and 69 and had been Muslim between 10 months and 30 years at the time of interview, and were evenly split between middle and working class (based on self-identification). All names have been anonymised and changed to match in origin the name they use now. The study used a narrative interview methodology and interviews lasted between 1 and 4 hours. It applied a narrative analysis (Freeman, 2013), tracing the dynamics of how the qualities of 'religious' and 'cultural' emerged.

## The stranger as a mode of belonging

To explore patterns of belonging in the narratives, this article draws on Simmel's (1950) influential essay, *The Stranger*, which has been the departure point for the 'marginal man' (Park, 1928), the 'newcomer' (Schuetz, 1944; Wood, 1934), the 'sojourner' (Siu, 1952), and the 'flâneur' (Bauman, 1993). Some have sought to identify the *stranger-as-figure*, who strangers are; whether ethnic minorities (Amin, 2012), migrants (Amin, 2012; Diken, 1998), or the poor and 'flawed' consumers (Bauman, 1997). Recent critiques develop the relational aspect of the stranger against an emphasis on stranger-as-figure (Ahmed, 2000; Horgan, 2012) or the discursive construction of strangers (Jackson et al., 2016), often in an attempt to overcome a negative sense of inter-group distance.

While both aspects of stranger-as-figure and stranger in a relational sense are present in Simmel's (1950) formulation, its usefulness is in seeing the *stranger* as a form of belonging marked by patterns of nearness and distance. For Simmel, the core characteristics of the *stranger* are both nearness and distance in relation to the group under question, such that 'he imports qualities into it, which do not and cannot stem from the group itself' (1950: 402); a person may be *in* a group but not *of* it (McLemore, 1991 [1970]). In fact, Simmel (1950: 403) states that the *stranger* as 'no 'owner of soil'' is meant in both a physical (territorial) and figurative (social) sense.

Importantly, Simmel's stranger does not seek assimilation through conformity, in contrast to the 'newcomer', 'marginal man' and some accounts of converts, for instance. Distance in this sense is not merely a negative position to be overcome but is its own form of relation, and the distance of the *stranger* carries the positive sense of contribution. The qualities of nearness and distance are co-present as a characteristic of social relations (Koefoed and Simonsen, 2011; Levine, 1991) and as such the *stranger* is able to 'problematize the normal, accepted ways' in a society or of a group (Harman, 1987: 16). It is these qualities that give the *stranger* relevance for 'bring[ing] us into contact with the limits of ourselves' and revealing 'what lies beyond the familiar' (Tiryakian, 1973: 57). Simmel's *stranger*, therefore, provides resources through which to explore patterns of belonging in a more nuanced and cross-cutting way. This is significant for the religion-culture divide and for seeing how converts can be made the stranger in a negative sense, appearing in the figure of an 'other', while position themselves as relational strangers in a contributory sense.

The following section outlines how converts are made strange in relation to born Muslims as well as majority society. The discussion then turns to trace lines and aspects of religious and cultural nearness and distance as part of the self-positioning of the narratives.

## **Continuums of estrangement**

Being positioned 'in-between' is certainly something converts experience, and importantly forms a part of the dynamics relating to how they seek their own position in social space. Gayle, a 69-year-old White British convert of 18 years, for example, referred to being stranded in 'no man's land', and in an email exchange prior to our meeting, Rachel, a White 29-year-old convert of 3 years, commented that, 'my husband and I (we're both converts) have found we somewhat don't fit into the categories people like to create based on born Muslims (and many times by born Muslims)'.

The process of being made strange emerges in a wider social sense of no longer fitting into the secular but historically Christian social imaginary. Being positioned as strange in society more generally is dominated by the trope of 'betrayal' and can result in verbal and physical abuse in the street. Richard, a White convert from Catholicism of 4 years talks about being challenged in the street when walking into a mosque by a man who tried to punch him shouting, 'you're a disgrace to your country'; and Zaara related being shouted at in the street and called a 'terrorist bitch', for instance. Subtle forms of Islamophobia also emerge as a general awareness which colours the way converts experience social space and things that occur in day-to-day life, often through a felt awareness of change in people's behaviour towards them, such as small avoidances or looks. Through both explicit and subtle ways, British converts are 'othered' and repositioned as part of the cultural landscape. Through a conflation of religion, ethnicity, and culture White converts can be 're-ethnicized', decentred as no longer of the majority in favour of an ethno-cultural view of them as Muslim, while ethnic minority converts pass invisible from this gaze: they are already racialised as other and go unnoticed as converts.

In relation to family members, Ramahi and Suleiman (2017) have suggested that converts find themselves in the position of an 'intimate stranger', characterised by 'benign neglect' – a lack of interest in how their families perceive their conversion. However, experiences varied from pleasure, to indifference, to extreme pressure, and even abuse and ostracism. Rather than a single concept then, this is better understood as a continuum.

At the more positive or indifferent end of the continuum a few talked about being surprised by their parents' 'as long as you're happy' reaction. Lewis, who was 22 and had been Muslim for a year talked about 'going slow' and being careful about telling his family out of concern about their reaction. While parts of his family warranted such caution, he also talked about his mum being pleased that she 'had got her son back', recognising his happiness and fulfilment.

For others, the term 'intimate stranger' appears far too benign. Significant also is that it seems that ethnic minority converts on the whole (though certainly not exclusively) suffer at the hands of their family more than White converts (from an interview with New Muslim circle leader at a prominent mosque). Rizwan, who was brought up Hindu, was physically beaten and had to leave home. Zaara, who was brought up Hindu/Sikh and Gayle, who was Christian, faced degrees of ostracism from their families. Simran grew up in a Sikh household, although wasn't practising

herself, and her mum and members of her extended family still weren't speaking to her a couple of years after she had converted. Simran contextualised this in geo-political issues that play out at a local level, situating the animosity she experienced in the 'bad blood' that continues to exist between Sikh and Muslim communities stemming from the 'backdrop' of post-partition politics in India.

In relation to born Muslim communities converts similarly experience a continuum of reactions, and which do not always meet expectations of being welcoming and friendly. Where they may be more so initially, this often cools (Roald, 2004). As Stephen, from London, who had previously been Christian and converted just over 5 years previously, said, 'So everyone wants to come and hug you and get a bit of that purity from you. [laughs awkwardly] It's a bit [of an] unusual situation'. This leaves some feeling like *functionalised strangers*, greeted warmly for their purity and the reward that can be accrued rather than as an individual person; like something of a 'collectors' item', as Richard put it, or as 'a notch on the bed post', 'an arrow in the quiver', or as 'window dressing' as it was also variously construed. For converts of South Asian heritage, even such 'functionalised' warmth may be absent. In this sense, Vidya, a 25-year-old lawyer from London who had been brought up Hindu, contrasted what she referred to as 'coveted converts', who are White British, with 'ethnic converts' that 'because we come from some type of ethnicity . . . we somehow can manage alone and we somehow can manage without the wide acceptance and support of the community because of our ethnicity'. That is, they are seen as culturally familiar and therefore not in need of religious support.

Towards the less benign end of the scale converts can experience outright suspicion and rejection or be seen as 'religious imposters' (Rogozen-Soltar, 2012) and become *refused strangers*. This exclusion can be based on converts' ethnic and cultural background, being from a different culture and not speaking Arabic or 'cultural' languages, such as Urdu or Punjabi (also Roald, 2004; Zebiri, 2008); and, especially for Black converts, outright racism (Zebiri, 2008). These kinds of issues might lead to pressure to conform to certain practices and exclusion without it. Rosie, who was 44, White British and had been Muslim for 19 years, talked about the 'cultural expectations' she faced in her previous marriage. From the point of view of her in-laws, who were Palestinian, she was seen to have become 'a Palestinian wife' upon conversion and marriage and was subsequently expected to conform to their ideas of correct role behaviour, something she came to strongly refuse and is now divorced.

At times, this position as *stranger refused* may be aggressive. Saiorse, brought up Roman Catholic, had been Muslim for 11½ years at the time of interview and related this passage from several years previously which captures her stranger-ness being refused on grounds of her ethnic and cultural background:

And this went on and on . . . 'Go back to your life. You're European – you shouldn't wear a scarf. You should be out drinking and partying'. And I was like 'No, I've been practising Islam for this long, who are you to tell me that?' 'I'm a born Muslim' [he replied]. . . . So he's like 'You're not Muslim anyway. Your mum's English and your dad's Irish'. 'So? What difference does it make? They're not Muslim, doesn't mean I can't be a Muslim' . . . Like, how can you say that?'



White British converts can certainly experience a loss of White privilege in relation to born Muslims such that: ‘in some contexts, whiteness can signal subordination rather than dominance, marginality rather than normativity, and disadvantage rather than privilege’ (Moosavi, 2015: 1930). Such a loss of privilege may help appreciate why the emphasis on discrimination from born Muslims may be the stronger feature in the narratives. However, that this emphasis on discrimination from born Muslims is also true for ethnic minority converts suggests this is not so straightforward. What becomes clear in these examples is that the stranger cannot be ‘a man [*sic*] without a history’ (Schuetz, 1944: 502) but is embedded in social and political context and histories which permeate how converts appear as strangers.

In reference to cases such as these Rosie, reflecting on her personal experiences as well as those of other converts she has worked with in her role at a local New Muslim organisation, talked about ‘religious abuse’. Rizwan likewise characterised such instances of refusal ‘spiritual abuse’ and ‘convert abuse’. That is, even when conveyed in the language of ‘culture’, the discrimination is interpreted against their claims of religious belonging, serving to reinforce their foregrounding of religiousness for their identity. In these ways, converts are *made strange* and go unrecognised as *religious* subjects by being viewed as either ethnically and culturally distant, and therefore not belonging, or, as Vidya also highlighted, as ethnically and culturally similar.

## Situating betweenness

Having established how converts are made strange, the following sections turn to discuss the positions participants carve out for themselves as *strangers*. In order to register the aspects of nearness and distance constitutive of *stranger* relations and also the religion–culture divide through which these emerge, the following discussion adopts an analytical frame of how senses of *religious nearness* in relation to Islam, *religious distance* in relation to the faith (or none) they were brought up in, *cultural nearness* in relation to Britain, and *cultural distance* in relation to many born Muslims are established through the narratives. This sets up a dynamic framework to analyse more complex and cross-cutting patterns of belonging, here applied to the case of convert narratives. Two important caveats are in order beforehand, however. First, this four-way frame is meant for analytical purposes, it does not represent discrete categories or a neat division between these aspects. As will be shown, the dynamics between them are of great importance. Second, neither does it suggest that what is referred to as ‘religious’ or ‘cultural’ is somehow inherently religious or cultural or can be designated as such. The exact features and practices that are narrated on one side or the other vary between individuals and even over time within individual narratives, there is no ‘typicality’ in this regard. As such, the focus is not the ‘whats’ (what is ‘religious’, what is ‘cultural’) but rather *how* and *with what effects* the aspects of religion and culture and nearness and distance emerge. That is, it is the religion–culture *dynamic* that forms the common feature across narratives despite individual trajectories and variances or socio-demographic characteristics – whether age, class, ethnic or religious background, gender, town/city of residence<sup>1</sup> – and this dynamic is the focus of the discussion.



## Religious nearness

A religious nearness in relation to Islam, a sense of being an ‘insider’ and belonging in the religion of Islam, is developed in negative relation with cultural distance to many born Muslims (see below). That is, converts distinguish themselves from ‘Muslims by name’, referring to identity categories or forms of practice seen as largely devoid of ‘proper’ religious content. Their claim of belonging in Islam is, therefore, based on their religious subjectivity and it is from this position that the religion–culture divide proceeds.

Hannah, a White convert of 52 who had been Muslim for 4 years, for instance, remarks, ‘there’s a great deal of culture in Islam, which isn’t Islam’. She also talks proudly about how in trying to understand this relationship, her position as *stranger* can have positive effects; when, for instance, asking born Muslims to show her where their interpretations are in the Qur’an or sunna: she says: ‘Erm, *mash’allah* I’ve made people question their own faith and come better onto the *din* just through my stupidity . . . just going “but I can’t find it anywhere, I can’t find it!”’ and ‘it has to be in there, doesn’t it?’. Rachel, likewise, talks about her frustration at being told ‘cultural things and saying that that was Islam. And then when I questioned it, getting told off’. In response to being told she ‘should dress like an Arab woman . . . There’s a hadith’, she responds ‘[gently sarcastic and with the milder frustration attained by temporal distance] “Oh okay, is there.” Is it made up by any chance?’ Opening up this interpretive, contributory space is important as it is on these grounds that they challenge rather than conform to dominant conceptions of what is and is not considered Islamic by asking for evidence from these scriptural sources, even often treating answers they receive with suspicion and highlighting contradiction and inconsistencies.

Even when their decisions might be seen to conform to particular, more conservative interpretations, this still reflects processes of questioning and reflection. The hijab was a common example of this. Zaara, for example, remarks,

the reason I didn’t take hijab was because I wasn’t ready to because of lack of knowledge. And I’m not gonna do something because somebody tells me to or because it has to be done, I need to know why (. . .) when I realised it’s actually a commandment from God, I decided to take it because it’s practising my faith. That’s what hijab means to me.

As in this example, and as other practices they might adopt (with significant individual variance), such as in lifestyle or diet, where significant changes are made, these are narrated with *religious* rather than cultural qualities and thus form part of their establishing their position as religious subjects in Islam. This contrasts with practices narrated as *cultural* and which may be rejected (see below).

Converts also exhibit loose and peripatetic organisational and institutional affiliations, often as suits the stage of their journey and learning as well as their lifestyle (Jensen, 2011), rather than conforming to any one school of thought. Katarzyna, who had grown up an atheist before passing through a ‘spiritual’ stage, first came to Islam through a Sufi group she was drawn to having previously practised meditation. Although she commented that she still probably felt closest to Sufism under the umbrella of Islam, she did not consider herself a Sufi and no longer went to the group. Only one of the converts I spoke to followed a particular school of thought, others were aware of the orientation of the

particular mosque or group they attended but did not define themselves or their Islam in those terms.

Converts prefer to rely first and foremost on the Qur'an, and then on sunna and hadith, along with their own further reading, something frequently emphasised by participants (also Zebiri, 2008). Consequently, it has been suggested that converts represent a specific kind of modern Salafi fundamentalist position, owing to Salafism's literalist and anticulturalist stance (Özyürek, 2015). Even those, however, who talk about their liking the structure and authority of Islam, challenge and reinterpret a literalist scriptural reading of Qur'anic injunctions that would just as often be in ways which evoke a 'stubbornly egalitarian' view as a conservative one. Saoirse, who identified as Salafi, at numerous points expressed anything but conservative social attitudes; the occasion of an older man with long grey hair, dressed in all Black and wearing high-heeled boots walking past the window of the café we were in did not prompt a point of reflection on traditional, conservative gender roles, but of the value and richness of pluralism and of people being able to live confidently and dress accordingly.

A literalist and anticulturalist stance is often interpreted in very much a sense of following the spirit rather than the letter of law or the exact actions of the companions of the Prophet. Matthew, a 29-year-old convert of 10 years who lives in a town with a small born Muslim population, described himself as a 'Qur'an-ist' with 'salafi tendencies and principles', and his narrative is embellished with tales of the early Caliphs. Yet, he states 'I question the legitimacy of whether all hadith of the Prophet is genuine. This is because they were mostly written down the centuries leading after his death'. The return to the fundamentals of scripture then, can be as much one of interpretation and innovation, rather than of literalism and conformity. In fact, the term Salafi itself can be a deceptively 'elastic' label (Inge, 2016) and may be better understood 'as a bid for legitimacy' (Hegghammer, 2009: 249) rather than indicating social or political views. Here the 'bid for legitimacy' is strongly related to claims of religious nearness and of their belonging in Islam.

## **Cultural nearness**

Establishing a sense of cultural nearness, that they are not as a result of conversion culturally alien, predominantly emerges in relation to Britain and the culture or part of society they are so often positioned as having 'left' or 'betrayed'.

One way these emerge is in fairly simple statements and claims of normalcy, such as Richard's declaration, 'I'm just a normal bloke'. Very often, however, the claims are bolder. Richard further states, for instance, 'I'm English. I live in England. Saudi is for the Saudis'. Likewise, Zaara declares, 'I'm still me. I'm still Zaara from the East-End'. Responding to 'a big pressure to almost convert to being Asian or Arab', Rachel asserts her cultural nearness in relation to Britain simultaneously with her cultural distance to born Muslim communities when she continues, 'no, that's a British thing. I'm staying British thank you very much' in reference to making eye contact with male clients in her work. These forthright assertions are made in this way precisely because it is felt they need to be made in the face of the process of their being repositioned as distant and dislocated from belonging.

Indeed, Jensen argues, in relation to Danish converts, that ‘their belief is informed by individuality and autonomy, features that characterize general forms of modern religiosity in Western Europe’ (Jensen, 2006: 643), a point Richard exemplifies well when he remarks, ‘I sort of think I’m quite western in my way of looking, right or wrong [*sic*]’ when discussing his charity work with the homeless as a more important facet of his Islamic identity than ‘unnecessary’ changes to clothing or public displays of piety such as praying in the street. This is not just about certain practices, but is also linked to values, ways of thinking, and ways of being in and of the social world. To quote Susanne, relating her coming to realise the religion–culture divide and how people from different backgrounds expressed God:

For me, it was a very, very colourful way of seeing that, you know, really it’s about my way because essentially I have always been European, I can never become Eastern. My religion is an Eastern religion, but I can never become Eastern unless I incorporate that into my European way of thinking.

There are times when what might be called more cultural aspects of Islam are positively highlighted: this is part of the ‘framework’ Islam provides for life and society. Abstention from alcohol and monetary interest are linked with less damaging ways of living, for instance. These, however, are also seen to concord with British cultural values rather than be alien to them.

Islam’s compatibility with science and general scientific understandings of the world are also consistently emphasised in this vein. This itself reflects and challenges the wider context in which science and religion are often opposed as well as the importance and relevance of scientific explanations and reasoning itself in the modern British context *alongside* explanations and reasonings based on faith. While it is stressed that scientific understandings have their limits, the importance of a scientific worldview within these (or what is seen as its own) limits is not only an important justificatory aspect of the narratives, but also refers to a significant barrier in understanding they had to overcome for themselves before accepting Islam.

Significant also is when these kinds of assertions of belonging appear in the narrative. They very often appear embedded in stories of facing public forms of discrimination or abuse, either personal attacks or in broader reference to the social context and difficulties in being Muslim in Britain. In this way, they form a rebuttal and a challenge. In one passage, for instance, Zaara, when discussing discrimination and attacks against Muslim women and the government’s response, rails,

I was outraged and I was furious and I wanted to talk to Cameron. I wanted to phone him and say ‘you wanna come down the East End mate and have a pie “n” mash with me and I’ll teach you about London culture’.<sup>2</sup>

Julia, a mixed race convert of 6 years, also inveighs against a view of the oppressed, passive and sexless Muslim woman to dispel any sense of her alienness in this regard:

I go into Ann Summers shops to look at vibrators and stuff. Like, people look at me and go ‘Oh God, does she actually have sex? How can a guy find you attractive wearing all that?’ I get that

a lot. You get a lot of people like, 'Shit man, she is actually buying a vibrator'. Yeah, we have sex love. And what [do] I do? I wind them up and pull out the biggest black one. I'm like, 'How much is this?' Yeah, it's funny.

In relation to Islam, a sense of cultural nearness relates to how certain practices are established as having been the same, or at least very similar to, a person's practice before coming to Islam. These practices are developed as a form of personal cultural continuity: that is, they are not primarily presented with a religious quality, although this may become an aspect. Hannah, for instance, remarks how she did not drink beforehand so 'some things align neatly'. This is of course a complex area of great variation and it is managed and narrated in different ways. The fact that some practices are narrated as religious whereas others are narrated as cultural, nevertheless, reveals something important. It indicates how certain practices are assimilated by the converts as personal cultural congruity, they already dressed modestly or didn't drink alcohol, for example, and thus are cast in terms of nearness to pre-existing cultural practice rather than as adopting or attempting to conform to 'distant' cultural practices of born Muslim communities. Moreover, these practices can be seen in contrast to others that do require more significant changes, but which are assimilated on the basis of religious content (often after a process of inner struggle and negotiation), as with the example of Zaara and the hijab above.

## **Religious distance**

A sense of religious distance, that one cannot identify with a set of religious understandings/practices, emerges in relation to their religion or belief, including non-belief, of heritage. An initial way this is experienced is that it is theologically unpersuasive. Certain theological precepts, the Trinity and the idea of Jesus being both human and divine in various Christian traditions or the array of gods or manifestations of God in Hinduism, for instance, are seen as distracting and confusing, and contrasted with the simplicity and oneness of God in Islam.

Religious distance is also based on the view of a faith being largely a nominal, cultural tradition rather than substantively religious. Vidya, for example, found Hinduism lacking, being 'more about culture and tradition'. Adele, who had grown up a practising Catholic and studied theology at a Catholic university, remarked, 'it's kind of like something people do traditionally and culturally now rather than it being something that people follow as a faith'. Adele talks about how her own sense of religiosity didn't seem to fit in with her Catholicism, causing her to 'feel like a stranger in there [her church and the Church]'.

This frequently relates to their questioning why and how certain things are or are not done but not getting satisfactory answers, or being told to not ask questions but just follow. For instance, Sanjay, a 46-year-old convert of 12 years who had been brought up Hindu, related a story where he asked,

How do you know God is blue? How do you know God has eight arms? How do you know God rides this tiger? . . . and the answer was either err a backhander across the top of my head or erm just a, 'look, this is the way it is'.

This stands in contrast to Islam being able to supply the answers, and often Muslims being more patient of similar questioning, or at least not perceived to be making up answers. This also reflects the importance for many, although not all, of positive contacts with Muslims in the early stages, although this comes with various caveats.

An apparent paradox emerges here: despite an indictment of Christians or Hindus and their behaviour as a reason to reject these faiths, the same rejection does not necessarily translate for Islam despite mirrored criticisms of 'cultural Muslims'. However, foregrounding a 'religious lens' enables the unravelling of this paradox. Taking religious nearness as a start point, converts' critiques of born Muslims can be seen as points of critique from *within*, as contributory to processes of debate over religion and culture that converts enter into, and as such do not result in the dismissal of the whole, whereas critiquing other faiths from the outside produces a collapse between parts and whole.

## Cultural distance

The sense of being culturally distant, that is of the alienness of certain cultural values and practices, emerges in relation to born Muslims as well as majority society. For the latter, this is related to a critical position vis-à-vis dominant cultural patterns but must also be read alongside their sense of cultural nearness. Converts hold ambiguous relationships with aspects of Britain, being very often critical of western lifestyles as over-individualistic, materialistic, and over-sexualised, especially of the female body (Zebiri, 2008). Yet, these must be understood with the appreciation that being critical of one's country and aspects of its politics and culture is perfectly normal and unremarkable. In this way, their faith and national identities are not seen as contradictory or unreconciled. What may seem a contradictory relationship according to certain discourses, becomes more simply and banally ambivalent in a manner which need not threaten this belonging.

In this sense of distance and being a *stranger* from the dominant cultural and lifestyle patterns, Islam is seen to provide a framework for the way of life they feel has been lost in Britain, and thus distant, but one that is not alien. In fact, this dynamic between cultural belonging and unbelonging is present at times in laments about how society has changed, and changed for the worse. Rosie, for example, told a story of being part of a large group having *iftar* in the local park and says,

well it's a human thing but also a very British thing, the whole, you know, like you remember when they used to have street parties and things like that and the families would come out. And I think we don't do that enough anymore, and yet the Muslim community does it. You know, so we're, we're doing things that were the done thing here 30–40 years ago, we're still doing them, you know. And I think that's something that would be good for the wider community to see and to join in, you know take it as an example.

Thus, forms of criticism are based both on their cultural nearness, which makes their criticisms unremarkable, along with cultural distance, which points to ways in which society has changed (not necessarily for the better), and both seen to offer a contributory critical perspective.

The strongest way cultural distance emerges, however, is in relation to born Muslims, a rejection of certain 'cultural' values and practices. Many of the interviews were bookended, that is they formed the main trope of the discussion either side of the actual recording, by just such references. This, moreover, must be read alongside negotiations of how converts feel Islam can belong in Britain and as British.

It is here, also, that their position as *stranger* is asserted and claimed in this relation. Here, practices seen as religiously 'empty' and a matter of culture and tradition as well as those that are presented as Islamic but 'actually' cultural are called into question. The exact features that are rejected vary between individuals, yet the process itself is consistent. Representing the relation between cultural distance and nearness, Rachel remarked, for instance:

To me, in our society we do make eye contact, we do chat to people, we do make small talk, 'Oh the weather's crap outside. Have you seen it? Yeah, it's freezing' ha ha. To me, that's not flirting – it's just you making chit chat.

This, moreover, is seen as perfectly compatible with Islamic modesty in the way it is tied to intention – the intention is not to flirt or to display. Along similar lines, Richard, for instance, talked about self-control rather than avoidance with reference to alcohol and therefore not needing to stay away from old friends because they drink or avoid places with alcohol. As a further example, several female participants talked about what other people would see as an issue with being interviewed by a non-Muslim man, but what they saw as a perfectly good example of belonging in Britain. In these ways, the control of modesty is made as much an internal process firmly situated in a cultural context as one in which social interactions are more formally regulated. Evident also is a rejection of 'Saudi', 'Arab', 'Pakistani', and so on, values and culture, where certain aspects of these are seen as anachronistic and out of place in contemporary Britain.

It is not, therefore, simply a matter of patterning society and interactions to avoid undesirable situations, although aspects of this are present, but about cultivating the self. Along these lines they may challenge women's exclusion from mosque and the reasons given for it as 'excuses' with 'a strange logic' to quote Matthew. Avoidance, especially when it goes too far as a form of unnecessary and even unhealthy gender segregation (although the exact line for this varies), is seen as culturally alien to Britain and to their lives. Being told about exclusions of this kind might even be seen as something against the religion, and provides a direct counterpoint between cultural distance in relation to some born Muslims and their sense of religious nearness to Islam. For Rachel: 'My view is it's a man telling me I can't pray to God and he has no right to do that whatsoever'.

This is further reflected in the idea of the *umma*. It has been suggested that the *umma* and its promise of a transnational community attracts converts to Islam (Roy, 2004; Soutar, 2010). In the narratives here, however, the *umma* is an ideal, and the divisions within 'the Muslim community' are lamented, but they seem all too aware of the disconnect between the ideal and reality. Rachel, one of the few to even explicitly mention the *umma*, in fact rejects being 'just part of the *umma*' as this means being lost in a sea of cultural codes and practices to which she cannot relate.

Painful experiences appear here, including subjugation into domestic life and physical and verbal abuse. Rosie related realising that there were no women recorded on her ex-husband's family tree: 'I was just like, "do not play with me when it comes to deleting me from history, dude. What the heck!" And I just remember thinking, I can't do this culture'. For some, these are accepted for a while as they are told and believe that 'that is how it is' and they must 'endure' it. As Julia remarked, 'you start hearing domestic violence in Muslim families. You think well maybe I'm going through the same thing. Maybe it's supposed to happen like that; maybe it's Islamic'. This can create an unbearable pressure to conform if one wishes to maintain one's faith. There is a distinct gender angle to this where women suffer more than men, but it is not exclusive to women. Rizwan's narrative was dominated by stories of domestic violence at the hands of his wife, passivity to it from her family and the local community, as well as the police, and references to others with similar experiences.

In situations such as these, claims of cultural distance are not just claims of belonging in relation to nearness to British society more widely or claims of the legitimacy of a 'westernised' Islam, but can also be a mode of empowerment that enables them to escape a loss of agency or cycles of abuse without giving up their faith. It is the realisation for some that, as Julia put it, 'I could be a Muslim on my own'. Given this, it is perhaps unsurprising that converts can often find great comfort with other converts (although this shouldn't be exaggerated) as they hold out the greater prospect of being both religiously and culturally near. Zaara remarked that upon discovering a New Muslim circle 'it was wonderful. All of a sudden I could relate to people'. Hannah also remarks in reference to a convert friend of hers 'we get on so well I think' cause she is, she was actually well, yeah, non-Muslim if you know what I mean; sort of English. She was brought up on bacon sandwiches and her mum going out and getting drunk down the pub, and things like . . . She has those sort of things in her as well'. Katarzyna referred to this as being 'culturally secure'. In the face of the negative ways in which they are made strange, this forms a necessary point of support and connection.

This raises an important issue. In contrast to the concepts positioning converts as in-between discussed above, Özyürek (2015) highlights how they reproduce aspects of Islamophobic discourses to claim their national belonging while also reproducing the disavowal of this to born Muslim minorities. Such discourses were present in the narratives here of cultural distance in relation to born Muslim communities. Yet, while at times this is so, at other times they rail against such views from wider society and there is also generosity and recognition of born Muslims and for what earlier generations have done to establish Islam in Britain. Importantly, the former emerges as part of carving out a legitimate place for themselves in Islam, and often stems from direct experiences of its refusal. It is a claim of nearness on religious grounds, to belong to Islam, to be a Muslim, and to not just follow but be agentic and help shape. The latter emerges when they are claiming cultural nearness to wider society, and in the face of its refusal.

It is important, therefore, to see this in a complex set of relational dynamics of (a) often challenging their own views prior to embracing Islam that reflected wider Islamophobic discourses, (b) their negotiations of an Islamic religious belonging in the



context of Britain and in which they do make significant changes, (c) challenging Islamophobic discourses from friends, family and wider society, and (d) facing often considerable discriminatory pressure from born Muslims. This relational positioning of nearness and distance along the lines of religion and culture is bound up with the negotiations individuals make as they establish, find their way and begin to assert their religious identity and their, and its, place in their life and in society.

## Conclusion

This article has argued that based on an ethnic lens, existing conceptualisations of the social location and relations of converts to Islam position them as in-between, and thus struggle to locate them in relation to majority and minorities in society. However, foregrounding rather than neglecting converts' religious identity, and drawing on Simmel's notion of the *stranger* as a form of belonging, presented a more dynamic framework for analysis of patterns of nearness and distance along the religion–culture divide. This brings into view cross-cutting patterns of belonging and allows an appreciation of converts' own positioning based on their religious subjectivity.

In this way, the common identity under Islam can act not as a list of traits or values, but rather as 'conditions for communication' with 'a shared fund of common understandings' (Hylland Eriksen, 2015: 7). As one person I spoke to in fact noted, the 'flexibility that Islam sets up so that it can operate in a pluralistic world with people of different backgrounds and of different ideas'. Converts thus certainly believe that both Islam and Britain are capacious enough for them to belong to both. This article has suggested how our conceptualisations of their position in society may do the same.

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## Notes

1. An intersectional approach focussing on how these features affect this variance would certainly be an interesting and worthwhile study. However, this article focusses on the common *dynamic* at work.
2. David Cameron, who was Prime Minister at the time. 'Pie "n" mash' refers to a traditional working-class dish from the East End of London.

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